

Access, Coping and Relevance of Education at Local Level: A Case Study.

A life course approach to the analysis of young people’s educational trajectories.

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Abstract

Il presente articolo introduce gli obiettivi e il disegno di ricerca del progetto “Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe” (GOETE) e ne presenta alcuni esiti relativamente all’analisi di un caso studio di una delle città coinvolte: Bologna.

Il progetto GOETE ha indagato come sono regolate le traiettorie educative per bambini e ragazzi tra la fine della scuola primaria e l’inizio dei percorsi scolastici secondari e non obbligatori in otto paesi della UE: Finlandia, Francia, Germania, Italia, Olanda, Polonia, Slovenia e Regno Unito.

La ricerca analizza i processi educativi tenendo conto degli effetti delle disuguaglianze sociali, dei cambiamenti nella *governance* dei sistemi educativi in una logica di *lifelong learning*, *knowledge societies* e contesti educativi transnazionali. La prospettiva di indagine del “Life course” fornisce una chiave di lettura interattiva del processo educativo e orienta l’analisi verso la connessione tra aspetti istituzionali dei percorsi di vita individuali e le biografie individuali.

The present paper introduces the objectives and the design of the project “Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe” (GOETE) and it presents some findings emerging from a case study conducted in one of the cities involved in the project, Bologna.

GOETE project analyzed how educational trajectories of children and young people between the end of primary education and the beginning of post-

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compulsory routes are regulated in eight different EU-member states: Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and the UK. The research assesses the outcomes of education, taking into account the effects of social inequalities, changes in the governance of education in terms of lifelong learning, knowledge societies and transnational educational spaces. “Life course” perspective provides an interactive understanding of educational processes and addresses the interplay between the institutionalization of individual lives and subjective biographies.

Parole chiave: traiettorie educative, Unione Europea, transizioni educative, life course, progetto GOETE.

Keywords: GOETE project, educational trajectories, life course, educational transitions, European Union.

Introduction

The project “Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe” (GOETE)ⁱ has analysed how educational trajectories of children and young people between the end of primary education and the beginning of post-compulsory routes are being regulated in eight different EU-member states: Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and the UK.

The GOETE project has been focused on education applied lifelong learning approach combining life course and governance perspectives. The life course perspective includes a broad understanding of educational processes and educational trajectories putting attention to the interaction among institutional and individual actors inside and outside school, between welfare and education systems – at local, national and transnational level.

Educational research has focused in the recent past on assessing the outcomes of education, taking also into account the effects of social inequalities, changes in the governance of education in terms of lifelong learning, knowledge societies and transnational educational spaces. Less

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attention has been given to the ways in which educational processes and educational trajectories actually do emerge and to the transitions within such trajectories, which in turn imply decision-making processes. “Life course” perspective provides an interactive understanding of educational processes and of educational governance that addresses the interplay between the institutionalization of individual lives and subjective biographies (Settersten/Gannon, 2005).

Education research and policy needs to acknowledge the relevance of all these levels. This implies analysing the regulation of access into initial and further education, the possibilities of coping with education through mobilising formal and informal support, and the subjective and systemic relevance of education (Walther, Parreira do Amaral, Cuconato, Dale, 2016).

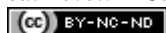
The present paper suggests a life course perspective as path for analysing educational trajectories across disciplinary boundaries. Moreover, it introduces the objectives and the design of the project and it presents some findings emerging from a case study conducted in one of the countries involved in the project, Italy.

Life Course: Theoretical Perspective on Educational Trajectories

An understanding of educational processes and educational trajectories – and of the transitions within such trajectories as well as decision-making processes involved – requires a theoretical approach that accounts for the interplay of institutional/structural and of individual/subjective aspects in their interaction.

“A *life course perspective* asks how young people’s *access* to different stages of education is regulated; how *coping* with the forms and demands of education and lifelong learning is facilitated through formal and informal support, and whether education is *relevant* for the future lives of young people, and if so, to what extent” (Loncle, Parreira do Amaral, Dale, 2015: 9).

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Life course is understood as the documentation of the stages through which individuals pass along their lives, especially institutionalized stages such as school, training, military/civil service, work etc. The concept of life course may be contrasted with that of biography; whereas life course points to an institutionalised construction of (culturally defined) patterns of lives, biography can be regarded as the “narrated life”, i.e., a subjective meaning-making with regard to one’s individual life course. Further, the institutionalisation of the life course is connected to the development of welfare and education systems in the context of modern nation states. As result, the life course has been more and more ‘standardized’ with effective and powerful notions of a ‘normal’ life course and biography (Heinz, 1997). In the context of late modernity, however, in which life course transitions increase, notions of life course normality become more and more fictitious. Accordingly, life course research increasingly has to consider both stability and change in individual lives as they unfold across time and generations and in specific historical, social, and cultural contexts (Loncle, Parreira do Amaral, Dale, 2015). The life course perspective considers educational trajectories throughout the whole life span recognizing that developmental growth refers not only to childhood and youth but continues through adulthood into old age. It therefore suggests a multidisciplinary approach and an ecological model placing families and individuals in the context of historical, demographic, and social change (Mortimer, Shanahan, 2003). While the life course perspective focuses on institutional aspects, the biographical perspective refers to subjective constructions. The biographical approach is widely recognized since the 1970s in social research in terms of “first order constructions” as the basis for scientific interpretations as “second order constructions” (Chamberlayne, Prue, 2000). This approach criticises a positivistic understanding of social phenomena and takes the dimension of subjective experience into account. As such life course and biography represent two important framework concepts for analysing educational trajectories inasmuch as they help take into account both institutional demands and biographical developments. In conclusion, such an approach enables us to understand to what extent different institutional structures, regulations and biographical paths play out with regard to access, coping, and relevance of educational trajectories in different contexts. A life course perspective – one that takes account of the

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interaction of the institutional and individual levels – makes it possible to relate the social structure of educational trajectories to individual agency within educational trajectories (Giddens, 1984; Biesta/Tedder, 2007).

The GOETE Project. A Brief Overview

The GOETE project analysed how educational trajectories of children and young people between the end of primary education and the beginning of post-compulsory routes are regulated in eight different EU-member states: Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and the UK (Cf. Walther, Parreira do Amaral, Cuconato, Dale, 2016).

On a *theoretical* level, the analysis of the regulation of educational trajectories alongside the thematic dimensions of transition, access, coping, relevance and governance contributes to re-conceptualising the relation between education and social integration in late modern knowledge societies. Against this background, the GOETE project aimed at re-conceptualising education in terms of lifelong learning by combining a life course and a governance perspective.

The GOETE project has covered the period from transition into lower secondary education to transition into upper secondary education/vocational education and training, i.e., the age group between 10 and 16 years (see figure 1).

European coverage was secured by selecting countries according to a model of “transition regimes” (Walther/Pohl, 2005).

Applying a *life course* perspective, GOETE analysed young people’s educational trajectories along three main dimensions (Cf. Parreira do Amaral, Walther, Litau, 2013):

The category of *access* in order to understand social inequalities in educational trajectories. GOETE analysed what schools do to prevent early school leaving and to what extent they provide boys and girls, and young people from different social and ethnic backgrounds, equal access to education, especially at transition points within their educational trajectories.

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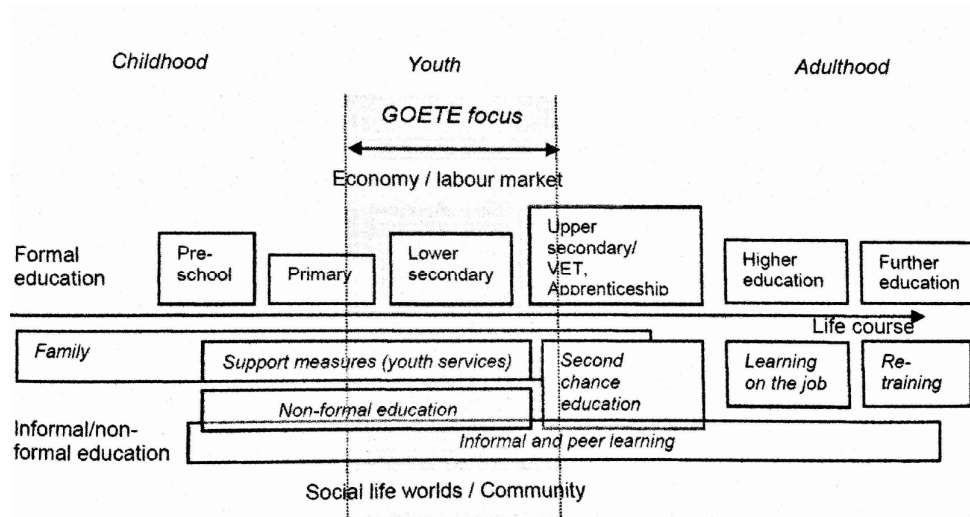


Figure 1. The Focus of the GOETE project

Unequal access and early school leaving are also related to different abilities and resources for *coping* with educational demands. GOETE investigated how students, especially those from deprived social backgrounds cope with educational demands. It analyses measures of active inclusion through formal and informal support inside and outside school and how formal, non-formal and informal learning are related within education systems in general and in educational trajectories in particular.

Individual decisions to invest in education depend on the *relevance* learners ascribe to education for their subjective life plans. GOETE assessed what skills and competencies are held relevant for “satisfying and successful lives” in late modern knowledge societies from the perspectives of employers, policy makers, trade unions and other agencies of the civil society, teachers and other educational professionals outside schools, pupils and parents.

The question of the adequacy or inadequacy of education in regard to social integration implies a perspective on *educational governance*. The GOETE project analysed mechanisms of governance in relation to access, coping

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and relevance of educational trajectories with regard to the actors and administrative levels involved, communication and cooperation, the voices of the individual students and their parents as well as in terms of current discourses and reforms on school entry and progression, organisation of support, teaching and curriculum development or funding of education point.

Analysing the complex interactions between social structure and individual agency in the life course in different transition regimes required the integration of qualitative and quantitative research. The project applied a multi-level and mixed-methods-design by combining a variety of research approaches and involved a range of diverse actors and perspectives (Cf. Walther, Parreira do Amaral, Cuconato, Dale, 2016: 7-9):

- Eight national country reports containing contextual information;
- Surveys with students at the end of lower secondary education (N=6390) and parents (N=3290) about transitions and experiences in their educational trajectories;
- A survey with school principals on how they perceive student trajectories and how they contribute to their regulation (N=984);
- A comparative analysis of forms and contents of teacher training through expert interviews (N=65) and document analysis;
- Case studies into 24 local school spaces (Maroy, 2004) through expert interviews (N=208), individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (N=504);
- High level governance analysis through expert interviews (approx. N=95) and document analysis;
- Feedback of findings into social arenas of educational policy making at local level.

The sampling for empirical fieldwork research in GOETE covered three different regions and cities in each of the eight countries. Selecting the sample for study was based on the careful consideration of geographical, socio-economic, and cultural criteria representing different economic, cultural, and social realities within each country. The regions or cities chosen for the empirical fieldwork represent different levels of affluence

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and/or economic/industrial and socio-political contexts, particularly with regard to rates of economic development, employment, and wealth.

The multilevel approach required that the different studies were first analysed separately and second, that overall thematic analysis were conducted bringing together the different levels along the themes of *life course*, *governance*, *access*, *coping* and *relevance*.

The Case Study at Local Level: Bologna as an Example of Mediterranean Cityⁱⁱ

The following section presents some findings emerged from the case studies conducted in one of the countries involved in the project, Italy.

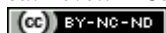
In GOETE, in order to complement insights gained from documental analyses and quantitative surveys, a total of 24 local case studies – 3 per country – were conducted using expert interviews, individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions among students, teachers, parents and local experts (both internal and external to the school). This part of the research relates to a specific subproject which aimed at generating qualitative material in order to:

- 1) allow a closer look into the dynamics of the governance of educational trajectories;
- 2) generate a deeper understanding of the local schools spaces and their cooperation with other local institutions;
- 3) analyse the climate in the school environment.

The local case studies focus on providing insights into relationships among a number of actors involved in educational trajectories during transitions, aiming at a better understanding of their different perspectives, and at describing different constellations in the governance of *access*, *coping* and *relevance* in the educational trajectories of lower secondary students in Europe.

For this purpose, in each research site (i.e., in 3 cities per country), one lower secondary school has been selected in order to analyse transition

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problems as well as good coping practices to contrast them. Three lower secondary schools have been chosen in Bologna, Ancona and Catania. The schools in each city have been selected for their high percentage of disadvantaged and/or immigrant pupils, situated in a low income neighborhood.ⁱⁱⁱ

Principals, teachers, students, ex-students,^{iv} parents as well as other internal and external experts were investigated through individual interviews: approximately 50 individuals per city have been involved (see table 1).

Data collection made use of different methods: *in-depth* and *face-to-face interviews* for bringing out different actors' points of view and *focus groups* with students and teachers, in order to foster the debate and the discussion on specific topics, looking at the way these topics were collectively defined. Interviews and focus groups were combined and interwoven with unstructured observations made both inside schools (during formal and informal activities) and outside in the neighborhood, within formal and informal spaces.

A fixed interview protocol was needed in order to provide national data useful for comparison between the different countries involved in the project. Also, the fixed interview protocol has been afterwards smoothly modified by the Italian team, adapting the list of questions to the local cultural and socio-economic context, but still saving those crucial aspects of the interview protocol.

Table 1. Italian Case Study Sample

	No. of interviews			No. of Focus Groups			Total no. of interviews / FGs
	Bologna	Ancona	Catania	Bologna	Ancona	Catania	
Principals	1	1	1				3
Teachers	4	5	3	1 (5 teachers)	0	1 (5 teachers)	11 (14)

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Experts – internal	2	1	1				4
Experts – external	6	5	8		2 (3 and 7 experts)		21
Students	6	5	3	3 (6, 5 and 6 students)	1 (7 students)	3 (5, 8 and 6 students)	18(21)
Ex-students	6	6	6				18
Parents	7	6	6				19
Total	32	29	28	4	3	4	100

At the end of the field work, data has been analysed as a global corpus. According to the thematic perspectives of the GOETE project – relevance, life-course, access, coping and governance – a coding list was established as a set of concepts and categories that gave structure to the research results. When necessary, new codes were defined and, finally, all data have been aggregated, methodically confronting differences and similarities.

An important part of the overall analysis included the production of short exemplary biographies and related schemes.

In what follows we present the local case of Bologna. The section, after presenting background information on the city and on the school, will focus on the findings (emerging issues) and present the case of Giorgio (fiction name), an exemplary biography.

The Bologna Case Study

Bologna is the capital city of Emilia-Romagna in North Eastern Italy. The city is has been undergoing a phase of substantial reforming started in late

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2006 resulting in a process of decentralisation and subsidiarity in which the different city districts^v acquired more and more autonomy (including specific functions on social and educational services within the framework of the regulations approved by the Municipal Council).

Bologna has an important role both within Italy and Europe. Even though the city is rather medium-sized counting approximately 460,000 inhabitants, it plays an important role in cultural, economic, social, and political aspects, especially when considering its metropolitan area with roughly 1 million people. The city recurrently ranges among the 10 European cities with high quality of life and social services and has one of the highest per capita income and lowest unemployment rates in Italy. This is mainly due to its strong industrial and trade tradition in the fields of mechanics, foods, and electronics, important retail and wholesale and to its geographical position at the crossroads of the most important communication junction of Italy, which makes of Bologna a very important railway and motorway hub. Though its economy and lifestyle represent one of the highest standards in Europe, Bologna "the red" has been a symbol of left-wing cities since the end of the 2nd World War.

Immigrants in the city in 2014 constitute 15% of the population. They are chiefly of Romanian, Albanian, and Ukrainian origin. Other important groups come from North Africa and the Philippines. Counterbalancing the ageing native population, thanks to the minority groups the number of births has risen, contributing to the positive growth of the city and to the multicultural composition of its school population. Although social policy in Bologna and in the whole Emilia-Romagna Region is strongly responsive and institutionally well-functioning, the on-going economic crisis, which is affecting the whole country, brings its consequences and makes social policy governance harder than ever.

The Bologna case study school was an institute situated in one of the most disadvantaged areas of the city with a high rate of people from migrant background (in particular Roma). The case has been sampled as disadvantaged as it is officially recognised as a "border school", due to its location which is considered a 'ghetto' within a working-class district. While the neighborhood has been planned in the early 1960s to accommodate the migrant population stemming from the Italian South,

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during the 1980s and 1990s it has also been designated to take in the populations escaping from the Balkan war and from Albania.

Currently, the area offers several social services, sport facilities and parks and its central area has been already re-qualified, although stereotypes and prejudices are hard to die. In the last years the district has developed in cooperation with the local education service, networking schools, voluntary associations, vocational training centre and many projects have been carried out in order to help pupils with educational and social disadvantages to improve their relational and social skills.

The school, which offers to pupils a very nurturing and safe place, is located in a green area and is close to other social and cultural services. At the time of the research, in the school there were 135 students, 18 teachers and 5 teachers for special education. 52 pupils were enrolled in the 3rd year classes.

The student population mirrored the population mix of the district. Actually, one of the main aims of the school has been to promote social integration through many intercultural projects. Regarding ideas and concepts aimed at strengthening foreign students opportunities, teachers revealed four major aspects/goals:

- Italian language literacy, as a functional and effective tool, both for a purpose of interpersonal communication and for learning performance;
- Quality of peers relationships and the opportunity to participate in group activities and interactions;
- Possibility to "live the district" even after school, by opportunities for participation and inclusion in social activities and sports;
- Opportunity to express aspects of the own culture, country of origin and history.

To achieve these goals, the school collaborates with many actors in the area, providing educational activities both in the morning and in the afternoon from Monday to Friday. Workshop activities are considered supportive experiences of coping and concern both traditional educational knowledge (maths, grammar, science and so on) and social and professional skills like sport, drama, journalism, cooking, painting, dance and carpentry. According to teachers the afternoon activities have different aims:

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- To enhance skills that otherwise would have not be acknowledged in traditional school activities;
- To orient students toward the labour market, through direct participation in work activities, fostering different role models from those they experienced from their parents or elder siblings;
- To avoid students spending their free time on the street, minimising risks to come into contact with baby gangs or criminal activities.

Many extra-school educational groups based on a socio-relational approach are active in the area. By building a meaningful relationship between adults and teenagers (inside and outside school), educationalists try to provide students with a stronger consciousness and engagement in their own educational path. This service aims to support lower secondary school pupils' performing skills in their everyday life. Within the group, pupils spend time in recreational (sport, music, dance, study trips) and formal learning activities. The school, in accordance with the family and Child Social Services, establishes pupils' access to those kind of groups. Pupils with a disadvantaged family background are more welcome.

Another important task is played by the quality of school-parents relationship: both teachers and educationalists are involved in its positive development, especially because in disadvantaged contexts the relation is some times demanding and the personal situation makes it more difficult.

With regard to the transition from lower secondary to vocational training, pupils have the possibility to encounter professionals from local enterprises to gain better knowledge about the opportunities offered in the local labour market. Guidance and counselling projects are run to orient pupils' future choices; meetings with experts and upper secondary school delegates are organized. Parents are also invited to participate and they seem to highly appreciate teachers efforts on this task. Quoting a Social Worker interviewed:

“Given this particular social context, teachers in this school spend all their best energies here and this allows the school itself to be much more effective in education and care than other schools in Bologna”.

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Findings: Emerging Issues related to Acces, Coping and Relevance of Education

The following section presents some findings - in forms of emerging issues - from the Bologna case study according to the thematic perspectives of access, coping and relevance of Education^{vi}.

Relevance of education

Rather than counting on the relevance of education for future occupational careers, interviewees substantially agree – especially at this level of education (lower secondary) – on the importance of giving pupils basic tools and knowledge for their future steps and growth; offering relational care for their personal development; stimulating their awareness of the centrality of knowledge itself for the achievement of active citizenship. As far as disadvantage is concerned, this encompasses both certified disabilities and attributed dispositions (frequently ascribed to family distress caused by social, economic and cultural problems). Quoting an expert interviewed:

“The disadvantage issue has two meanings: the first related to the disability issue; the second related to social backgrounds and cultural issues, to disadvantaged social groups, hence related also to foreigners, linked to social dynamics”.

Migration is not underlined by interviewees as an explicit condition of disadvantage, although the reduced resources (money, tools and personnel) in the Italian educational system make it difficult to answer properly to linguistic issues and specific needs of minorities (e.g., Roma). In general, because of heterogeneity of pupils (both in terms of languages and social status), in the lower secondary schools more attention is paid to care rather than to cognitive aspects.

In the opinion of teachers and experts, the relevance of education is generally low among families, who sometimes show a cultural shift that is unfavorable to the full recognition of school as a central actor in society.

Access to education

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Students in their first year of upper secondary school often determine their success throughout high school and beyond. Many experts claim that school systems must support better the first year of upper secondary students to improve the chances of success and limit drop-outs.

Moreover, they underline some key challenges that local authorities and schools should address to support successful transition, since pupils who enter upper secondary school, often are unprepared for the coursework they are attending. Quoting a Professor of a Technical Institute:

“Teachers have to be aware of educational relationship, of handling a class... I have colleagues who have difficulties because they haven't been trained and can't handle challenging situations. Because it is clear that those we call “disadvantaged subjects”, are also “difficult pupils”.

Teachers and experts suggest to personalise the learning milieu, paying attention to individual needs. Actually, the lack of resources (economic and human) makes it difficult to provide one-on-one tutoring.

Establishing closer relationships between lower and upper secondary schools and with the community (employers, local social and educational services, public and private stakeholders) is seen a crucial task to accomplish.

In terms of educational policy, the experts propose to create (or improve) a data-set at local/district level to monitor transitions from lower secondary school to upper secondary school.

Coping with educational disadvantage

A structural differences between lower and upper secondary schools emerge: the first is more welcoming and suitable for supporting and educating disadvantaged students (e.g., providing individualised teaching methods and afternoon activities); the second is more focused on teaching with less individualised projects. This difference seems to considerably affect the performance of disadvantaged students.

Often the relationship between school and foreign parents is a hard task, mostly because of communication problems. Instead, the risk of dropout is

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equally valid for immigrants (including Roma children) and socially disadvantaged pupils.

Experts and teachers agreed that disadvantaged pupils need more possibilities of “learning by doing”; in this perspective, new technologies seem to help and attract pupils' attention.

In terms of policy, teachers as well as experts underline that a high teacher's turnover (widespread within the country) worsens any coping measures. Furthermore, experts suggest a specific initial teacher training for those teachers who will work in disadvantaged areas; as well as an extended number of teachers per school in order to individualize methods and enhance more cooperative learning. Starting from the Bologna case study (in which schooling time has extended to provide an educational service even in the afternoon), experts agreed that it represents a positive way for other schools which found difficulties in coping with disadvantage.

Exemplary Trajectories of a Student: Giorgio^{vii}

Giorgio is 14 years old and lives with his parents and a younger brother in the local case study district of Bologna. He was interviewed twice, before and after he left the case study school. At the time of the second interview, he was attending a Technical Institute (upper secondary school). His parents are internal migrants and they left their South a year before Giorgio was born, and they still miss their origins. His mother works as a carer and his father is a bricklayer. His mother has a lower secondary school diploma while his father has a primary school leaving certificate. His family is not very present in his life. He states that he is an independent boy, but when he talks about his parents, in particular about his mother, it clearly emerges that he feels neglected (*coping*).

During the first interview, Giorgio emphasises that his experience at primary school was lighter hearted than that at the lower secondary school. He says that he was happy at primary school (*life course*) and, in general, he has a good memory of his time at that school, even though he experienced the transition from the third to the fourth school year as very challenging. In fact, according to the educational plan of that school, in the fourth year, pupils have to change building wing and classmates to meet and socialise with other schoolmates. Waiting for this transition, Giorgio remembers that

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the idea of this change gave him a feeling of discomfort. He was afraid of meeting new classmates and teachers. As a matter of fact, this bad sensation disappeared after few weeks (*life course*).

Concerning the support received by teachers during the transition from primary to lower secondary school, Giorgio remembers that the teachers wanted him to get used to doing homework every day and not only during the weekend, because in the new school he would have had lots of homework every day. Also during the transition from primary to secondary school, Giorgio remembers his anxiety about the forthcoming change. For a month, he had the same dream every night: “While my classmates went on to the new school, I stayed back in the previous. It was a very bad feeling” (*life course*).

In his opinion, the difference between the primary and secondary teachers was the level of support: the previous gave him much more help and they also paid more attention to what he said (*coping*).

Giorgio’s parents chose the local lower secondary school because it was close to home and they knew that it was a good one, well engaged in helping kids (*relevance*).

Teachers work to improve the challenging relationship between schoolmates: a big problem is represented by some gangs of students, in some cases involved in bullying. Internal meetings and debates on the topic are organized (*coping*).

In general Giorgio expresses a good opinion about his lower secondary school. He recall it as a helpful school. He appreciates its good teachers and the workshops organised in the afternoons. Its guidance project was very useful in choosing his present school. According to him, teachers have helped to develop his self-esteem and empowerment (*coping*).

Now, he is attending a Technical Institute.

Giorgio explains that access to his current school is open to all pupils, but during the first two months, teachers set diagnostic tests to assess the level of all students. Even though his grades are not good in all subjects, Giorgio recognises that he can count on a good learning background. Giorgio enrolled in the Institute, even though it takes one hour to get there: he wants to be a computer programmer and this school has a good reputation in this field.

Giorgio likes his new school and he feels at ease with his classmates and

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most of the teachers. Up to this moment his school grade average is quite good (6/7), but he adds that learning is still easy because they are revising all subjects and he was well prepared by the lower secondary school. Homework is his challenge: too much in his opinion. As a matter of fact, he dedicates only 10 or 15 minute per day to learning. Just as before, he would like to have more and longer breaks at school, because sitting down for more than two hours is a hard task for him.

The nicest thing in the new school are the girls, who are all very beautiful. Anyway, at the moment he does not want a girlfriend, because he thinks that it takes too much effort to keep a love affair alive and after few weeks it becomes boring.

He insists on the fact that he is an independent and very reserved boy. Giorgio tends to take decisions autonomously and, anyway, his parents are not very present. As a matter of fact, he chose the secondary school alone without talking so much with his parents.

Giorgio talks about his future or his problems with difficulty, because – he says - he is very reserved and his parents do not ask him anything. At the moment, Giorgio feels not supported by his family. During the primary school his parents, especially his mother, helped him with his homework, but now this is no longer possible, because she has a low level of education. His grandmother, who lives in South Italy, is an important figure in his life, but Giorgio speaks with her only by phone. He does not have great esteem for his parents; his mother works as a carer and he refers to this job with a bit of embarrassment, as if it was too humble. Indeed, in Italy this job is often considered only as migrant work, and an adolescent boy could fear being picked out by his coevals for his modest origins (*coping*).

Giorgio does not give great importance to his education; he recognises its importance for his future, although he says that learning is very boring and he does not like it (*relevance*). In any case, he is quite ambivalent towards his future, expressing both an optimistic and a pessimistic attitude. He is aware that there is an economic slump and his generation will have great difficulty in finding a job, but he believes that if you study and graduate, you can improve your possibilities and you will be more able to face this problem. “My father tells me that I have to study and not do as he did. My father did not study”.

After the upper secondary school diploma, Giorgio would like to take a

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Master's degree in computing.

Giorgio has a family history characterized by ruptures, and this experience has influenced his point of view and the scale of his priorities. His parents doesn't have any relatives in Bologna or in the north of Italy and they feel alone. For this reason, he considers family as the most important thing in his life and hopes to have one of his own, when he grows up. He remembers that he met his relatives during the summer when he was a child and for him this was a great joy.

In ten years' time, he sees himself graduated, with a house and a girlfriend, but he seems to lack conviction (*life course*).

Giorgio says that living in the district can be very difficult because it is not a very safe place, even though there are many leisure opportunities and courses for young people, especially in the public parks. In spring and summer some educators organise activities concerning manicure, basketball, theatre etc.

Giorgio goes out with his friends only in summer. During the school time, he spends most of his free time in front of his computer, chatting with young people from other Italian regions, or watching TV. His story reveals a quite depressive attitude: Giorgio would like to spend all day sleeping, computing and watching TV alone (*coping*).

Giorgio seems to be very slack and dissatisfied with his life. During the interviews he admits that he does not feel happy. Towards the end of the first interview he began to talk about death and his fear of dying. He is afraid of being hit by a truck. In the past one of his relatives had a bad accident and perhaps it disturbed him. He repeats all the time that he is bored, but he does not do anything to change his situation and his parents are not able to help him. Everything he does seems to bore him and he does not show interest in anything; he describes himself as an independent boy, who takes decisions by himself, but he seems very much alone. It seems like he was forced to learn how to help himself due to the lack of family support.

In case of learning and relational difficulties or psychological problems, Giorgio seems to have to cope alone since his family is not able to support him. Compared to his old school mates, who mainly enrolled in vocational schools, Giorgio decided for a more ambitious educational path himself, but it's not clear if he was aware of the implications of this choice.

As a matter of fact the highest rate of school failures and dropouts takes

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place just during this transition, which represents the real weakest link in Italian educational system, negatively affected by an incomplete reform of the school cycles. Experts recognise that the lack of homogeneity between these two school levels in terms of teaching approach as well as in terms of institutional organisation, cause children a lot of problems in adapting. In fact, while lower secondary school still aims at reducing pupils' social and educational disadvantage through an individualised approach and support intervention, upper secondary school doesn't have nor feel this institutional mission anymore. Its nature is selective, although, according to the last school reform, its first two years are now part of the compulsory education system, the nature of which is inclusive. The different mission of the two levels, social inclusiveness vs. skill selectivity, makes very difficult a reciprocal link promoting the vertical continuity of pupils school path (notwithstanding local practices to overcome this problem).

Giorgio, who lives in a disadvantaged suburban area and had attended the comprehensive school of his district since he was 3 years old, had to move to a upper secondary school located downtown, facing at least a double transition: 1. From one specific school organisation to another (in which the well-defined qualifications and social skills, such as respecting timetables and classmates and attention to teachers are taken for granted); 2. From a well known to an unknown environment, with new classmates, who represent a wider (most higher) social and cultural environment and new teachers – often less friendly and more results-oriented - who assume that students have already achieved emotive and autonomy skills, which very often have not been well assessed.

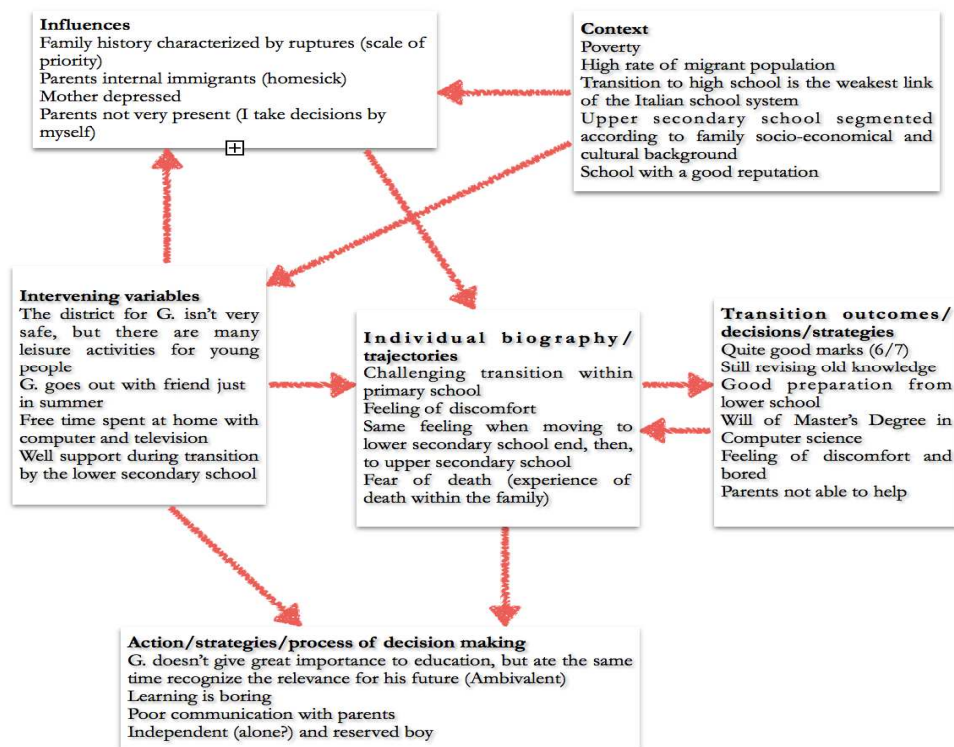
The following scheme (Figure 2), developed from Glaser and Strauss' coding paradigm, intends to contextualise Giorgio's decision-making process within a complex interrelationship between structure and agency. To start with the (structural) context level, Giorgio hasn't got any problem in choosing the upper secondary schools he liked (a technical institute focusing on computing) and apparently it is up to him whether he succeeds or not in coping with the challenge. Notwithstanding, while in the lower secondary school he was protected and supported in a very nurturing space by teachers who, well aware of his absent family, tried to develop his self-esteem, in the new school Giorgio is a pupil among the others and his life circumstances wouldn't be taken into account if, at the end of the year, his final achieve-

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ments won't correspond to the school standard. The arrows are not to be interpreted as determining or causing any outcome, but are deemed rather as a way of pointing to influencing factors and to interactions among the diverse actors involved, etc. The aim is to be able to describe more general constellations of governance from comparative analysis at a later stage. In this sense, each exemplary biography stands for a particular case that needs to be seen and interpreted against the background of its own context, paying attention to individual/familial, cultural, institutional, and socio-economic aspects.

Figure 2. Structure and agency in the educational trajectory of Giorgio, Bologna.



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Brief Conclusion

At the age of 14, Italian pupils, ending the lower secondary school, have to choose their next educational path, but they have still poor life experiences and low possibilities to take aware decisions. Transition from lower to upper secondary school is a real break point in children's school careers, and has a deep impact in their future life chances. This gap is also negatively affected by the unbalanced reform of the National Education System. In this framework, lower secondary schools have an unclear identity between primary education (vertically integrated schools take together primary and lower secondary school under the same management) and secondary education (sharing with high schools the strictly subject-based schedule organisation).

This mismatch between the end of lower secondary (13/14 years) and the compulsory school leaving age (15/16) may cause latency (and a waste of time as a consequence) of one year for those pupils, especially the disadvantaged ones, who want to attend vocational training. These 3 “standing alone” school years constitute the most demanding period for pupils to adapt in the new school environment: in fact, this is the moment in which socio-economic and cultural differences strongly emerge and, as a consequence, disadvantaged pupils, such as those from poor and migrant families, end up with having less opportunities than their peers.

From our interviews it becomes visible that lower secondary schools are confronted with many issues that are more in the scope of duties of welfare than of educational institutions. This poses serious challenges since neither the pedagogical/curricular organisation nor the teacher training are always appropriate to cope with these kind of problems.

As far as the completion of transition and compulsory education is concerned, in Italy each lower secondary school is responsible for promoting measures aimed at supporting pupils until the end of compulsory education, helping them to choose the most adequate upper secondary school through counselling and guidance, often coordinated with local authorities. Despite this commitment, the highest rate of school failures and drop outs takes place just in the transition year between lower and upper secondary school. To contrast this trend, in Bologna, for example, some

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interviewees supported an idea born in their own school context: allowing the creation of a “fourth-grade” of lower secondary school, where pupils in transition, waiting for insertion in vocational paths, can be kept and taught in basic education without “throwing” them in the “hostile” and rigid context of upper secondary schools. A kind of bridge education involving training centres, lower and upper secondary schools.

Despite this, pupils have to choose their next educational path at a very early age (13): they have still poor life experiences and little possibility to take informed decisions. As a result, there is a trend towards the reproduction of family status, ambitions and social/economic/cultural capital; pupils from migrant backgrounds and their families appear to be inspired by a pragmatic perspective.

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Notes

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ⁱⁱⁱ The field work started in March 2011. The research work with students and teachers ended within May 2011, just before the ending of the school year. Interviewing with parents and experts was widely distributed during the year and ended in November 2011.

^{iv} Students who were attending the first year of upper secondary school and who had been previously interviewed during their last lower secondary school year.

^v Bologna is divided in nine districts: Borgo Panigale, Navile, Porto, Reno, San Donato, Santo Stefano, San Vitale, Saragozza and Savena.

^{vi} A book about the GOETE research (both quantitative and qualitative) has been edited. Cf. Cuconato (ed.), 2014.

^{vii} Based on 1st student interview on 6th April 2011 (last year of lower secondary school), 2nd interview 14th November 2011 (first year of upper secondary school).

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